

Statement of the Montana Association of Christians (MAC)
to the Interim Commission on Sentencing
November 18, 2015, Helena, MT

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The Montana Association of Christians (MAC) brings together Christian communities and individuals to be present in the broken places of Montana. Since 1973, the Montana Association of Christians, first known as Montana Association of Churches, has been an integral part of public policy discussions, speaking out on the needs of children, families, the poor, and those who seek social justice. We seek to be a transformative advocate on issues that affect the most vulnerable and marginalized members of our communities, without regard to religious affiliation.

MAC has identified reintegration into the community of those returning from incarceration as one of our core priorities. MAC speaks from a Judeo-Christian ethic that echoes a constant theme regarding concerns for the captive person. Jesus associates himself with those in prison: "I was in prison, and you came to visit me." As leaders of Christian churches and as participants in and observers of the justice system in Montana, we speak to the needs of that system and are encouraged by the existence and vision of the Commission on Sentencing. This priority also fits with a second legislative priority of protecting children's well-being, as so many children in Montana are now affected by incarceration and its consequences for a parent even after release.

Today, we're here to inform the Commission that faith congregations across Montana have already begun training to become Healing Communities for all those individuals affected by the criminal justice system: those incarcerated, their families and children, and the victims of criminal acts. The framework for Healing Communities was developed with support from the Annie E. Casey Foundation and the Pew Research Center for Religion and Public Life. It is being adopted by major religious denominations nationwide, including Methodist and Baptist. The United Methodist Church has committed to sending the national UMC trainer for Healing Communities at no cost to Montana 3 times in 2015-16, to provide workshops open to all interested faith congregations, Christian or otherwise. More information at <http://umc-gbcs.org/healing-communities>

The HC training is designed to help congregations begin the work of reducing the stigma and shame for individuals and families of involvement in a criminal justice case, by dispelling the myth that some of us are not worthy of genuine care, concern and compassion. Healing Communities is not a program or model -- by design, training provides the framework, inspiration, and research foundation for congregations to develop their own unique ministry that fits local situations, resources and capacity, and to network with other congregations in the same area.

This month, over 100 clergy and lay members from 45 diverse faith congregations came to full day workshop training or informational meetings in 8 cities and towns across the state (see next page).

This welcome gift of statewide training was brought to Montana through the leadership of Freedom in Christ, an ecumenical worshiping community inside Montana State Prison in Deer Lodge that is supported by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Freedom in Christ provides pastoral care to inmates and staff from all faith backgrounds, focusing on providing God's presence to men during incarceration, and assistance as they return to their families and community <http://www.ficprisonministry.com/>. The training can equip congregations which choose to become

Healing Communities to continue that support during re-entry from prison, and provide support to all those impacted by the criminal justice system, including families and potentially those confined to county detention centers.

What's exciting is that this effort has brought together congregations from across the spectrum of theological perspectives, in a shared vision that "everyone is worthy of genuine care, concern and compassion -- No one is outside the pale of God's love."

Montana Faith Congregation Members Attending Healing Community Workshops or Informational Meetings in November 2014

Healing Communities Workshops

Butte, Nov. 8, 2015 -- 18 Clergy and lay members attended from 9 congregations:

Hope Lutheran Church, Anaconda	Boulder United Methodist, Boulder
Grace United Methodist, Dillon	All Saints Episcopal, Big Sky
First United Methodist, Anaconda	Aldersgate United Methodist, Butte
Holy Trinity Serbian Orthodox, Butte	Gold Hill Lutheran, Butte
St. James Episcopal, Bozeman	

Missoula, Nov. 2, & 3, 2015 -- sponsored by Missoula Interfaith Collaborative

32 Clergy and lay members attended from 10 congregations

Corvallis United Methodist, Corvallis	First Presbyterian, Missoula
Holy Spirit Episcopal, Missoula	The Lion's Den, Missoula
Open Way Mindfulness Center, Missoula	Community of St. Columba, Missoula
Atonement Lutheran, Missoula	Annunciation Greek Orthodox, Missoula
St. Paul Lutheran, Missoula	First United Methodist, Missoula

Informational Meetings to Introduce Healing Communities Training and Invite Participation in Spring 2016 Workshops --

Kalispell, Nov. 3, 2015 - 11 attended, including Clergy and lay members from 3 Lutheran and Methodist churches, along with family members of those incarcerated.

Bozeman, Nov. 4, 2015 - 4-5? Clergy and lay members attended from 4 Christian, Lutheran and Methodist congregations.

Billings, Nov. 4, 2015 - 25 Clergy and lay members attended from 11 Catholic, Methodist Lutheran, and nondenominational congregations.

Rocky Boy Reservation - Clergy from Lutheran congregation. Fort Peck and Blackfoot clergy and tribal members are interested in becoming involved in HC training in spring 2016.

Great Falls, Nov. 7, 2015 - 6 clergy and lay members attended from 5 Baptist, Methodist and Lutheran congregations.

Helena, Nov. 7, 2015 - 6 members from Lutheran, Methodist congregations and a new local faith-based coalition, H-CORP, focused on assisting returning citizens.